

Emerging Issues

in School, Family, & Community Connections

This research synthesis is the first in a series that will examine key issues in the field of family and community connections with schools. The issues highlighted in this synthesis represent critical areas of work in family and community connections with schools where clarification, agreement, and further development are needed, as well as promising new directions that are emerging. It is based on a review of over 160 publications.

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Executive Summary

This research synthesis is the first in a series that will examine key issues in the field of family and community connections with schools. The issues highlighted in this synthesis represent critical areas of work in family and community connections with schools where clarification, agreement, and further development are needed, as well as promising new directions that are emerging. By continuing to strengthen the research in the field we can help ensure that schools, families, and communities can come together to produce positive outcomes. After reviewing and examining a body of literature that included more than 160 publications, four key issues emerged.

Issue 1 — Clarifying the Concept of Family and Community Connections with Schools

The field of family and community connections with schools does not have consistent agreement on what is meant by the terms “connections,” “parent involvement,” and “community involvement.” The need to clarify these concepts comes not from a desire for universally acceptable, all-encompassing definitions, but from a need to be clear in our language so that researchers and practitioners can more effectively implement and measure the impacts of these connections.

Current research reveals that there are many different activities that connect families and schools. Often these activities are quite different from each other, yet they are lumped together as “parent involvement” or “school-family connections.” Some researchers emphasize activities that take place at the school, such as parent attendance at school events and participation in parent-teacher organizations (PTOs). Others include activities that take place in the home, such as parental homework help and discussions about school issues between parents and children. Still others include abstract concepts as well as actual involvement behaviors in their definition, such as parent aspirations for a child’s education.

These activities have very different impacts on students, schools, families, and communities. The variety of definitions make it difficult to compare studies and models of parent involvement to one another. They also make the analysis of the findings of multiple studies a challenge. For practitioners, these multiple definitions may lead to difficulties in making judgments about what kinds of activities to implement, how to implement them, and what results to expect from them.

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Similarly, many different kinds of activities fall under the heading of “community connections with schools.” One researcher may define a school-community connection as a formal partnership between the school and another local organization. Another may highlight learning opportunities for students that take them out of the classroom and into the community for real-life experiences. Still other researchers may look at the role of the school in the larger community—as a community center or a community institution that can play a role in community development efforts. There is also variation in the very way the term “community” is defined.

The challenge of defining school-community connections in a comprehensive way has similar consequences to the challenge of defining the full range of school-family connections. The multiple definitions make it difficult to compare studies with one another and to synthesize the results across studies. Multiple definitions also create challenges for practitioners as they attempt to select, implement, and evaluate different connection activities.

In addition to the general problem of multiple and overlapping definitions, two important factors have affected how family and community connections are currently defined in research and practice. First, there are the differences in perceptions of appropriate roles of family and community members in connections with schools. Second, there has been an emphasis on school-centered definitions of family and community involvement. Family and community involvement frequently means helping reach goals defined by the schools (administrators and teachers) that reflect only school values and priorities. There is a need for the field to consider expanded definitions that move beyond narrow definitions of family and community involvement to include theories, concepts, and ideas from outside the field of education, as well as culturally appropriate definitions and family centered practices.

Issue 2 — Measuring the Outcomes of Family and Community Connections with Schools

Parent and community connections have been measured inconsistently across studies and research has not yet captured the full picture of these connections and their results. There is a need to be precise in how we are measuring outcomes, in order to avoid faulty generalizations and conclusions and to clarify the sometimes conflicting evidence about the impact of connections.

The field must continue to explore new methods for capturing the processes and outcomes of these complex interactions between schools, families, and communities.

We must also capture the different outcomes of the connections for the various stakeholders—students, parents, schools, and communities—to gain a full picture of the impact of the connections. It is evident that connections can have a broad array of outcomes, ranging from increased student achievement and improved school climate to enhanced civic capacity for a variety of stakeholders. The multifaceted results of these connections lead to measurement challenges for both researchers studying the connections and practitioners evaluating the impact of their efforts.

While there is evidence that family and community connections can result in positive outcomes for all stakeholders, we must continue to clarify the relationships between the different kinds of connections and the outcomes they produce. A redefinition of terms and rethinking of research tools in order to measure the effects of all types of family and community connections with schools is needed to help the field progress. There is also a need to better understand and document how various school, family, and community connections create conditions that support a variety of results.

Issue 3 — Advancing the Research Base for Family and Community Connections with Schools

Research about the process and effects of family and community connections with schools is evolving and does not yet provide clear directions for practitioners. There is a critical need to take the body of research we have and build theory that can propel us into the next stage of research. Family and community connections frameworks can help research test the relationship between different components of the concept of family and community connections with schools, address the problem of unclear and overlapping definitions of the concept, and gain greater understanding of the predictors and impacts of these connections.

In our review, we also observed that researchers face numerous methodological challenges, including choice of design, sampling, measurement, and internal/external validity. New developments in research design and methodology that better link quantitative and qualitative research and more and improved conceptual models can move the field toward a stronger research base. Funding allocations to applied educational research and program evaluations must increase, a new level of partnership must be forged between practitioners and researchers to enable the use of experimental procedures in service settings, and program staff concerns related to random assignment and potentially intrusive data collection procedures must be addressed.

Issue 4 — Critical Areas for Research in Family and Community Connections with Schools

Our review of the literature revealed a number of critical research areas that surfaced repeatedly. Within each of the critical areas listed here, both *promising directions* and *research needs* are discussed. These areas are:

- Forging connections with families from culturally diverse backgrounds
- Connecting families with schools in homework help
- Connecting school, family, and community for effective school reform
- Connecting school, family, and community through developmental approaches and

integrated service delivery

- Connecting school, family, and community to support student transitions throughout the education system
- Developing process-based approaches to make connections
- Preparing educators and other school personnel to make connections between schools, families, and communities

Our charge as a field is to come together to address the issues highlighted in this document— to clarify the concept and outcomes of family and community connections with schools and to improve the quantity and quality of the research base available. In so doing, we will better understand these connections and create the knowledge needed to realize the potential of family, school, and community connections for student learning and students' lives.

A New Wave of Evidence:

The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement

This research synthesis is the second in a series that will examine key issues in the field of family and community connections with schools

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A New Wave of Evidence—In Short

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and through life. This fourth edition of *Evidence* confirms that the research continues to grow and build an ever-strengthening case. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.

How are the many ways that families are engaged in their children’s education related to achievement? Many studies found that students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to

- earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs.
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits.
- attend school regularly.
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.
- graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Several studies found that families of all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups, are engaged in supporting their children’s learning at home. White, middle-class families, however, tend to be more involved at school. Supporting more involvement at school from all parents may be an important strategy for addressing the achievement gap.

Do programs and special efforts to engage families make a difference?

Yes, several studies found that they do. For example, teacher outreach to parents was related to strong and consistent gains in student performance in both reading and math. The effective outreach practices included meeting face to face, sending materials home, and keeping in touch about progress. Workshops for parents on helping their children at home were linked to higher reading and math scores. Schools with highly rated partnership programs made greater gains on state tests than schools with lower-rated programs.

How do higher performing schools engage families and community?

Schools that succeed in engaging families from very diverse backgrounds share three key practices. They

- focus on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members.
- recognize, respect, and address families’ needs, as well as class and cultural difference.
- embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared.

When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement.

What is the impact of parent and community organizing on improving schools?

This type of engagement is based outside schools and led by parents and community members, and it is growing nationwide. These efforts are aimed at schools that are low performing. Strategies of community organizing are different from traditional parent involvement and are openly focused on building low-income families' power and political skills to hold schools accountable for results.

A new group of studies found that community organizing contributed to these changes in schools:

- Upgraded school facilities.
- Improved school leadership and staffing.
- Higher-quality learning programs for students.
- New resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum.
- New funding for after-school programs and family supports.

Summing up

When parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement. And when families and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, studies suggest that school districts make positive changes in policy, practice, and resources.

How can we put these findings into action?

- Recognize that all parents—regardless of income, education, or cultural background—are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well.
- Design programs that will support families to guide their children's learning, from preschool through high school.
- Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families.
- Link efforts to engage families, whether based at school or in the community, to student learning.
- Build families' social and political connections.
- Focus efforts to engage families and community members on developing trusting and respectful relationships.
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make sure that parents, school staff, and community members understand that the responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise.
- Build strong connections between schools and community organizations.
- Include families in all strategies to reduce the achievement gap among white, middle-class students and low-income students and students of color.

Diversity:

in School, Family, & Community Connections

Diversity: School, Family, and Community Connections is the third in a series of reports to help local school, community, and family leaders obtain useful research-based information about key educational issues. This synthesis focuses specifically on three categories: race or ethnicity, culture (including language), and socioeconomic status. The report also explores barriers to involvement for minority and low-income families, strategies that have been used to address those barriers, and recommendations that local educational leaders can adapt to address their specific needs. It is based on a review of over 64 studies.

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Executive Summary

This research synthesis is the third in a series of reports to help local school, community, and family leaders obtain useful research-based information about key educational issues. This synthesis addresses diversity as it relates to student achievement and school, family, and community connections.

Scope. The literature on diversity includes a wide range of student and family characteristics and affiliations. This synthesis focuses specifically on three categories: race or ethnicity, culture (including language), and socioeconomic status. The need to improve academic achievement among “diverse” student populations—notably African American, Latino, Native American, immigrant and language minority students, and students from poor families—is one of the most persistent and challenging issues that education faces. This research synthesis looks at the roles families can and do play in addressing that issue. The report also explores barriers to involvement for minority and low-income families, strategies that have been used to address those barriers, and recommendations that local educational leaders can adapt to address their specific needs.

Findings. We identified 64 studies with focuses and methodologies that met our basic criteria. From the array of information among these studies, we identified seven broad findings that summarize the overall knowledge base related to family, community, and school connections among minority and low-income populations:

1. No matter their race, ethnicity, culture, or income, most families have high aspirations and concerns for their children’s success. However, there are limited findings as to whether minority and low-income families’ high aspirations for their children have a positive impact on students’ school achievement.
2. Families from racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities are actively involved in their children’s schooling, although their involvement may differ somewhat from those of White, “mainstream” U.S. families. The extent and types of involvement among low-income families may be linked to poverty and economic stressors.
3. Family and school staff reports on the extent of family involvement and school outreach tend to be inconsistent, with the differences increasing in schools with larger minority populations. The reasons for such inconsistencies are not clear.
4. Research studies have identified barriers to minority and low-income family involvement in their children’s schooling—barriers that schools often can help overcome. These barriers include contextual factors (particularly time constraints, child care needs, and transportation problems); language differences; cultural beliefs about the role of families in their children’s schooling; families’ lack of knowledge and understanding of U.S. educational processes; and exclusion and discrimination issues.

5. Research findings are limited and inconsistent regarding the extent to which increased family involvement is linked to improved academic achievement among minority and low-income student populations. Findings specifically addressing the effectiveness of family involvement programs in boosting student achievement are also inconsistent. Although some research findings are encouraging, too little high-quality research has been conducted to support a firm conclusion.
6. The research base is thin, but some intervention strategies appear to be promising in strengthening family-community-school connections among minority and low-income student populations.
7. Some studies suggest that, in seeking to close the achievement gap, it is necessary to address the complex interactions among families, communities, and schools. Focusing on only one of these factors is not enough.

As these findings reflect, much more rigorous, high-quality research needs to be done before it is possible to draw firm conclusions about the ways in which families, communities, and schools can and do influence achievement among specific student populations.

Recommendations. From the 64 studies, we were able to make some recommendations that may help to strengthen local diversity programs and practices. Because the research base is so thin, these recommendations should be taken as tentative, subject to the need for both local wisdom and further research.

Recommendations for building relationships among schools, communities, and families include:

- Adopt formal school- and district-level policies that promote family involvement, including an explicit focus on engaging families who reflect the full diversity of the student population.
- Demonstrate active and ongoing support from the school principal.
- Honor families' hopes and concerns for their children.
- Acknowledge both commonalities and differences among students and families.
- Strengthen school staff capacity to work well with families.
- Provide supports to help immigrant families understand how schools work and what's expected of both families and students.
- Make outreach a priority; take the extra steps necessary to make it possible for families to get involved at school, as well as at home.
- Recognize that it takes time to build trust.

Recommendations for helping families strengthen academic achievement among minority and low-income students include:

- Provide families with training and resources to support early literacy.
- Help families use specific communication and monitoring strategies to support their children's learning.
- Encourage and support student involvement in a range of school- and community-sponsored extracurricular and after-school activities.
- Help low-income families obtain the support and services they need to keep themselves safe, healthy, and well fed.